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Essential Instructional Practices in Language and Emergent Literacy: Birth to Age 3

This document was developed by the **Early Literacy Task Force** (ELTF), a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN), which represents Michigan's 56 Intermediate School Districts.

INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES

This document is intended to be read in concert with the Essential Instructional Practices in Early and Elementary Literacy: Prekindergarten. *There is important overlap and continuity in these and other "Essentials" documents.*

For more information, visit www.literacyessentials.org

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Purpose

The purpose of this document is to increase Michigan's capacity to improve children's literacy by identifying a small set of research-supported literacy practices that should be a focus of professional development throughout the state. The focus of the document is on practices in individual interactions with children, rather than on center- or systems-level practices. The document focuses on infants and toddlers, as the first 3 years of life are when children learn the fastest and acquire the foundational skills that will support their development and learning for the rest of their lives. Improving language and literacy experiences in the infant and toddler years has the potential to improve "reading by third grade" outcomes. Early childhood programs can also help to address disparities in literacy achievement.

Research suggests that each of the ten practices in this document can have a positive impact on literacy development. We believe that the use of these practices in every care setting every day could make a measurable positive difference in the State's literacy achievement. They should be viewed, like practice guides in medicine, as a minimum "standard of care" for Michigan's children.

Language and emergent literacy skills develop rapidly during the first 3 years of life and are essential for later learning, along with other key skills for learning in the physical, social-emotional, and cognitive domains; this document focuses on practices to support language and literacy, though all domains of development are important. The main goal of emergent literacy during this time is to support language development, providing a foundation for literacy skills. From birth to age 3, language and literacy are one integrated domain. The core skills are understanding and using language and other forms of communication, and building vocabulary that reflects the child's understanding of the world. Some emergent literacy skills can also be encouraged directly, by exposing children to printed words, sharing reading experiences, and helping children become aware of sounds within words. When these experiences are fun and engaging, children develop a love of reading that will motivate them to learn to read. This document is written for early childhood practitioners who work with infants, toddlers, and their families (child care providers, early educators, home visitors, early interventionists), but the practices can be used by all adults who work with infants and toddlers and their families, in home-, community-, or early care and education (ECE)-settings. This document does not endorse any specific curriculum, but describes essential practices — specific ways of interacting with infants and toddlers — that should be infused throughout their learning experiences. Most of the practices should happen every day and be integrated into daily routines. Others should be less frequent because they focus on specific aspects of language, reading, and writing. This is not an all-inclusive list of every possible practice that supports language and emergent literacy, but instead, a description of the ones with the best evidence in the science of child development. Each recommended practice is based on current research, and may change when additional research provides more information on the best ways to support our youngest learners.

1. Create Safe, Secure, and Stimulating Environments

When infants and toddlers feel safe and secure, they can actively explore and focus on learning. When environments are stimulating, they support infants and toddlers to direct their own play, which provides adults with opportunities to engage in child-led conversations that support language development.

Create calm, predictable environments that support children's sense of safety.

- Care for children in small groups to reduce overstimulation.
- Use music and other sound intentionally, not as background noise.
- Create predictable but flexible routines (e.g., for sleep, eating, diapering/toileting, and play).
- Ensure children get enough sleep (infants: 13-14 hrs; toddlers: 10-13 hrs), including daytime naps.

Form consistent, close relationships to support children's sense of security.

- Care for infants and toddlers in primary caregiving groups, keeping the same caregivers/educators with children as long as possible.
- Interact affectionately and respond positively when children initiate physical or social contact.
- Respond quickly and calmly to children's physical and emotional needs, particularly distress.
- Communicate with adults and children in calm and consistent ways.

Create stimulating environments that encourage children's self-directed play and exploration, and use children's play as opportunities to support their language.

- Provide a variety of materials, including books, toys that promote eye-hand coordination (e.g., crayons, shape-sorters, blocks), role-playing toys (e.g., dolls, pretend food), music (e.g., rattles, drums), and art-making materials (e.g., paper, paint, markers, playdough).
- Reflect children's home cultures in music, decor, photos, and toys in early education and care settings.
- Place materials where crawlers and walkers can reach them on their own.
- Provide materials that can be used in more than one way; encourage children to choose their own toys and how they play with them.
- Use children's self-directed play as opportunities to label, describe, and explain what they play with and how they are playing.
- Plan enriching, playful experiences that intentionally and flexibly support development while building on children's interests.

2. Bring Attention to Print Concepts in Books and the Environment

Print concepts are understandings about how print works, and the functions it serves in our lives. Infants and toddlers learn about the many ways that print is used when we point out print concepts and printed words throughout the environment; creating a print-rich environment encourages adults to do this. Children learn print concepts about the mechanics of reading during book-sharing experiences.

Show children how print works, using both verbal and nonverbal strategies.

- Encourage children to touch and hold books and turn pages; comment on their actions with the book.
- Point to the print as you read it.
- Ask toddlers about simple print concepts (e.g., "Show me where to read.").
- Ask toddlers simple questions about print (e.g., "This is a P. Your name starts with P! Can you find another P?").
- Make comments about print (e.g., "That says 'help.'") and discuss the features of letters (e.g., "That is a D. It makes a /d/ /d/ /d/ sound, like dog and diaper.").

Show children that print has meaning and serves many purposes.

- Point to, read, and describe printed words in the environment, such as labels on shelves, packages, menus, and street signs, discussing purposes of the printed words (e.g., "That sign says 'blocks.' It tells us that this is where the blocks go on our shelves.").
- Show children that letters and words help readers understand what labels, menus, and signs say.

Create a print-rich environment that is meaningful to children.

- Use children's names and photos to label their belongings, cubbies, art, and other materials.
- Label bins and shelves with both pictures and words.
- Include words and images that are meaningful to children or useful in daily life (e.g., nursery rhymes, inspirational messages, grocery lists, packaging labels, menus, daily schedule, reminders).
- (See also Essential #8 for providing materials for reading and writing that are always available).

Use Developmentally Appropriate Literacy Experiences!

Avoid pushing children to read in this developmental period. There is no evidence that infants and toddlers can learn to read words conventionally, even when parents or educators use programs or materials attempting to teach infants or toddlers to read. Instead, there is evidence that having engaging and emotionally supportive book-sharing interactions with caregivers supports later reading development. Pressuring children to read can lead to bad reading habits and undermine their motivation to read. Instead, focus on creating fun learning experiences with books and print.

3. Share Books in Engaging Ways

Book-sharing fosters a love of reading when it is engaging and fun, and when children feel close to the adult reading. Book-sharing can be used to support comprehension and vocabulary when it is interactive, and when adults talk about the content of the book and link it to children's interests and experiences. Children who start sharing books with their caregivers before age 1 have better language and literacy skills later on.

Read to children from birth, and read often, sharing a variety of books and other texts.

- Share different types of books and other texts (e.g., magazines, newspapers, websites) with infants and toddlers, including stories, information books (which provide factual knowledge), and poetry.

- Choose high-quality books to share with children, making sure that at least some of the books have rich vocabulary (many different words, some words that are not from everyday language), use full sentences (rather than just one word at a time), and have pictures related to the printed words.

- Choose books with stories and topics that are interesting and enjoyable for children, including topics related to their family and culture.

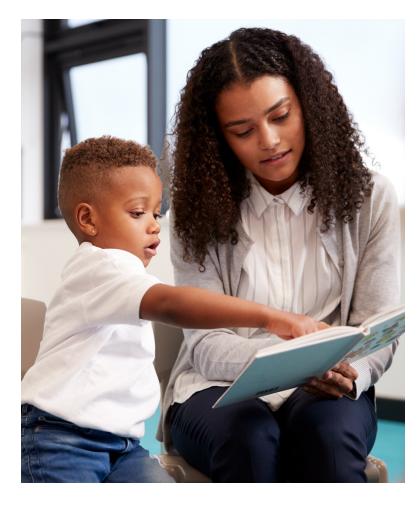**Foster a love of reading by making book-sharing engaging and fun.**

- Sit together with children, letting them sit on your lap or next to you while sharing books.

- Let infants and toddlers choose the books.

- Read the same books over and over again if children are interested in them – children love to predict what happens or appears next in their favorite books.

- Invite children to interact with the books by turning pages and pointing to pictures or words.

Make book-sharing interactive to support understanding of concepts and vocabulary development.

- Use different voices, facial expressions, and gestures to engage children in the meaning of the contents in books, acting out the important parts of stories, and talking about new words or ideas.

- Comment on links between the ideas in the book to children's experiences and interests.

- Comment on words that are new to children as you read books, and explain their meaning using words that infants understand or toddlers already say.

- Reinforce new words from books by talking with toddlers about the book topic so they can practice the new words themselves. Repeat new words and provide explanations or examples.

- Use questions and prompts to help children learn and label concepts in the book.

Low tech is best!

There is no substitute for adult-child interaction when it comes to language and emergent literacy. Limit television viewing and other screen time for children. If any, choose story-like, language-rich shows. Make television or tablet use interactive by watching with children and talking about what they see and hear.

4. Play With Sounds and Invite Children to Play With You

Infants are born paying attention to sounds of voices, and are attracted to higher-pitched and musical voices. Playing with sounds draws children's attention to the sounds in language and supports their skills for recognizing and working with the sounds of language (phonological awareness).

Encourage and respond to all sounds, from first coos to words and sentences.

- Imitate the sounds infants make, then expand on them with other vocalizations and words.
- Make eye contact and follow infants' facial expressions and eye gaze as you engage in sound play.

Use infant-directed speech with young infants to get and keep their attention.

- With infants less than 6 months old, use a higher pitched vocal tone, and stretch out the vowel sounds. Pause between phrases, and vary the pitch of your voice (e.g., "Hi baaaaby… See the biiiig bunny… She is soooo taaaall.").
- With infants less than 1 year old, use short phrases and repeat them several times.

Draw children's attention to the sounds of words using their names, songs, poems, and books.

- Sing songs with hand motions (which helps infants understand the meaning of the words) and let them "sing along" even before they can talk (e.g., Itsy Bitsy Spider; Sweet Potato Pie; I Can; or Wheels on the Bus). Draw children's attention to the sounds by clapping with the rhythm of a song.
- Share books, poems, and songs with rhymes (e.g., "Pat the cat sat on a mat.") or words that begin with the same sound (e.g., "Willy the whale likes wet water."). Play with the sounds in children's names. Talk about sounds in the words as you say them.
- Start by drawing children's attention to individual words (e.g., clap out the words in the sentence "The dog ran fast."). Next, draw attention to syllables (e.g., "Doorbell. That has two beats, doorbell. How many beats does pop-si-cle have?").

5. Enhance Two-Way Communication With Gestures

Gestures (hand and body motions used for communication) let preverbal children choose the topic of conversation and promote two-way communication between adults and young children, which encourages children's development of vocabulary. When toddlers combine two gestures, or combine gestures with words, this helps them learn to combine words and ideas into sentences.

Use gestures along with words to promote two-way communication.

- During play, use gestures to show what objects do (e.g., turn the plane propeller or make the frog hop).
- Use simple gestures while you sing so even preverbal children can learn to "sing along."
- During book-sharing, point to pictures as you read or talk about them. Use hand gestures to act out key concepts in the book.
- During care routines (meals, sleep, diapering), model gestures for the main concepts (e.g., "eat," "drink," "sleep," and "diaper") so preverbal children can learn to communicate their needs.
- Always talk while you gesture so children learn to pair the words with the gestures.

Encourage preverbal children to use gestures during book-sharing.

- Invite children to point to things they recognize in books by asking simple questions (e.g., "Where's the bunny?" and "Can you find the mouse?").
- Invite children to point to what they are interested in by asking open-ended questions (e.g., "What do you see on this page?" and "Which ones do you like?"). Then label and describe what they pointed to.

Respond to children's gestures to promote language.

- Use children's gestures as a cue for what to talk about. Translate their gestures into spoken words.
- Respond to children's gestures, and their gesture-word combinations, by repeating their message back and expanding on it.

6. Support Skills Across Developmental Domains That are Important for Writing

Writing is a multi-faceted activity about composing and communicating messages. It is supported by a set of skills including motor skills, understanding and using symbols, and creating messages for others. Early writing often looks like scribbles; this shows that children understand that writing has meaning and can communicate a message.

Provide opportunities for children to practice the motor skills needed for writing.

- Support fine-motor activities that build strength in small muscle groups in hands and fingers, such as working with playdough, finger painting, or picking up objects of different sizes, with hands then with tools.
- Provide a variety of age-appropriate materials to write, draw, and paint.
- Encourage all early forms of writing, including simple marks, scribbles, and drawing.

Give children natural opportunities to write or compose messages, and talk to them about the meaning.

- Talk about what they have drawn, marked, colored, or painted without evaluating it or assuming what it is. For preverbal children, comment on the composition (e.g., "I see that you used blue to make lines, and here is a red circle."). For verbal children, use open-ended prompts (e.g., "Tell me about your work," or "Can you tell me about this part?").
- Ask older toddlers what they have written when they are finished writing. Affirm their messages about the content, regardless of what their marks look like.

7. Converse With Children, Responding to Their Cues and Letting Them Choose the Topics

High-quality language interactions are central to supporting early language skills. Infants and toddlers need to hear a rich variety of language that is directly related to their attention and interests, and to be encouraged to communicate in all the ways they can — with facial expressions, hands and bodies, and voices. The same child-led, responsive interaction practices support both preverbal and verbal toddlers, but the practices can look a little different, depending on the child's age and communication skills.

High-Quality Language Interactions With Infants and Toddlers

	Preverbal Children	Verbal Children
Establish joint attention	- Get on the infant's level physically. Be close so the infant can see, hear, and touch you. - Watch infants closely to learn what they pay attention to — look to their eye gaze, facial expressions, body orientation, and actions. - Make eye contact so it is clear that you and the infant are paying attention to each other (dyadic joint attention). - Look at the things the infant is looking at or playing with so you and the infant are attending to the same thing (triadic joint attention).	- Place yourself near the toddlers' activities, getting down at their eye level. - Watch and listen to toddlers to learn what they are doing or trying to do. - Look for opportunities to join the toddlers' activites without taking over. - Comment on what toddlers are doing to let them know you are paying attention; wait for an invitation to join their play. - Respond to toddlers' invitations to join their play or activity.

High-Quality Language Interactions With Infants and Toddlers

	Preverbal Children	Verbal Children
Talk to children about their interests	▪ Talk about things infants are doing and paying attention to (parallel talk). ▪ Narrate what you do as you do it (narrating/ self-talk). ▪ Warn infants before changing what you are doing (anticipatory talk).	▪ Talk about what toddlers do, see, and hear, and what they might think or feel. ▪ Let toddlers know ahead of time what you are going to do. Explain your reasons for doing what you do.
Encourage children to choose the topic of conversation	▪ Invite and encourage infants to choose their own toys and activities. ▪ Comment on what infants choose to do.	▪ Ask toddlers what they want to do. ▪ Support toddlers' activity choices. ▪ Comment on toddlers' choices.
Use child-directed speech	▪ Use a calm, warm tone of voice. ▪ Use a musical tone of voice, with higher-pitched tones, to get young infants' attention. ▪ Use short, simple sentences. ▪ Repeat key words or phrases. ▪ Emphasize key words with exaggerated voice, face, and gestures.	▪ Use a calm, warm, and normal tone of voice, and speak slowly and clearly. ▪ Use longer sentences with more complex, adult-like grammar. ▪ Use a variety of sentence types, including questions.
Respond to children's communication cues	▪ Respond to infants' facial expressions, sounds (cooing, babbling), and body language (gestures, head turns, squirming). ▪ Interpret infants' interests, experiences, and intentions, and translate them into words. ▪ Listen and watch for infants' cues that they are done interacting (glancing or turning away, fussing, moving away).	▪ Respond to toddlers' facial expressions, vocalizations, words, and body language. ▪ Interpret toddlers' interests, intentions, and internal states. Translate them into words and connect them to their context. ▪ Follow toddlers' leads when they end the interaction.
Imitate and expand	▪ Repeat infants' vocalizations or words back to them.	▪ Repeat toddlers' words and phrases, re-phrasing to use the words correctly (e.g., Toddler: "Me go." Adult: "You're saying you want to go?"). ▪ Repeat toddlers' words and add another idea. (e.g., Toddler: "Me go." Adult: "You want to go? I want to go, too. Who should we take with us?").
Extend what children say	▪ Talk about what infants are doing, what they are seeing and hearing, and what they might want or be trying to do (sportscasting: out-loud play-by-play of infants' actions and experiences).	▪ Talk about things connected to toddlers' interests and activities. ▪ Talk about things beyond the here and now (feelings and thoughts, events in the past or future, people not present).
Keep the conversation going	▪ Encourage infants to vocalize again. ▪ Engage in face-to-face vocal turn-taking. ▪ Ask simple questions and wait for an answer. ▪ Respond to any cue from the infant and keep the exchange going.	▪ Ask open-ended questions about what toddlers are doing. ▪ Use "I wonder" statements that invite toddlers to think about what is possible. ▪ Respond to all communication attempts and keep the conversation going.

8. Provide Materials for Reading and Writing That are Always Available to Children

Infants and toddlers learn best when they pursue their own interests in ways that utilize and build on their own skills. Environments and routines should provide them with the freedom to explore books and use writing and drawing materials at their own pace and in their own ways.

Provide children access to many different, high-quality books in all settings.

- Place books within children's reach so they can access books any time.
- Make sure children have access to their favorite books and ones that reflect their home language, family, and culture.
- Simple books are just as effective as ones with expensive features such as lift flaps.

Give children opportunities to write in whatever forms they can.

- Provide children with a variety of writing materials and surfaces on which to write (e.g., crayons or markers on paper, chalk on chalkboard or sidewalk, sticks in sand).
- Provide toddlers with opportunities to write meaningfully (e.g., "signing" their name, writing a grocery list, or checking off items from a list).

Low tech is best!

There is no evidence that technology supports language and literacy learning in the infant and toddler years, including electronic books and technology designed for education. The key to language development is active, back-and-forth communication between children and adults; limit the things that detract from these high-quality interactions.

- Limit children's access to electronic toys, tablets, phones, and media.
- Focus on books and writing materials, rather than electronic toys, games, and apps.

9. Monitor Language Development, Screen for Early Delays, and Refer Families to Services as Needed

Toddlerhood is when language delays first appear, and when early intervention is most effective. Delays in early language development may cause challenges in behavior regulation and social interactions; if not addressed, these delays lead to later difficulties in language and literacy.

Screen and monitor children's hearing.

- Ensure that infants' and toddlers' hearing is screened regularly.
- Monitor hearing for possible deficits that may be due to frequent ear infections.

Screen and monitor children's social communication behaviors, understanding of language, and ability to talk.

- Take families' concerns about their child's language seriously.
- Assess children's language and communication together with families.
- Make sure the person who screens the child's language is familiar to the child so the child is sufficiently comfortable and can show what they know.

- Use a validated screening tool to monitor children's abilities to understand language and to communicate with gestures and words.

Screen multiple-language learners in culturally and developmentally appropriate ways.

- Screen children in their primary home language.
- Screen and assess children learning two or more languages in both/all languages.
- Involve families in screening the child's language.

When screening indicates a hearing deficit, or a risk of delay in development, refer families in Michigan to Early On for further evaluation: www.1800earlyon.org

10. Work With Families to Promote Home Language and Literacy Environments That are Rich and Responsive

Infants' and toddlers' primary learning environment is their home, and their first and most consistent educators are the family members with whom they live. The home language and literacy environment has a strong and lasting effect on language skills, emergent literacy, and related social and academic skills.

Create positive, goal-oriented relationships between families and educators.

- Acknowledge families' roles in their child's development and learning. Ask for parent and family insights about their child's interests and needs.

- Take a strengths-based approach that recognizes that all families have the ability to support their child's development. Help to maximize those abilities.

- Refer families to services that can support their own health and well-being so they can be calm, attentive, and responsive to their infants and toddlers.

- Ask about and prioritize families' goals for their child's development and learning.

- Support families in their home language whenever possible.

Work within families' home routines to support infants' and toddlers' language and emergent literacy.

- Point out and encourage things families already do that support their children's language and literacy (e.g., talking about what interests their child, responding to child cues, and asking questions to keep the conversation going).

- Point out child behaviors that are communication cues, help families interpret these cues and respond in ways that support language development and emergent literacy. Show how families can explore and play with objects, talk, and use gestures during everyday routines with children.

- Help families identify ways to change their child's environment and routines to be calm, consistent, and stimulating (e.g., keep consistent meal and bedtime routines, maximize children's sleep, and reduce extra noise that may disrupt children's concentration).

- Communicate that all family members — mothers, fathers, siblings, and others — are part of the child's home language and literacy environment and can support their development.

Show families they can support language and emergent literacy in many ways in addition to "reading," including:

- Sharing books with pictures.

- Story-telling.

- Singing, rhyming, chanting, rapping, or other word play.

Incorporate families' culture and language in all settings.

- Represent the child's cultural background and home language (if it has a written form) in books, labels, and other materials.

- Provide families with children's books (to borrow or keep) in their home language or most comfortable language.

- Encourage families to communicate with their children in their most comfortable language. Recognize that the ability to speak multiple languages has many social and cognitive benefits for children.

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Process for Development and Review

This document was developed by the Early Literacy Task Force (ELTF), a subcommittee of the Michigan Association of Intermediate School Administrators (MAISA) General Education Leadership Network (GELN), which represents Michigan's 56 Intermediate School Districts. The Early Literacy Task Force included representatives from the following organizations, although their participation does not necessarily indicate endorsement by the organization they represent:

Early Childhood Administrators' Network, MAISA

English Language Arts Leadership Network , MAISA

General Education Leadership Network, MAISA

Kalamazoo Public Schools

Michigan Association for Computer Users in Learning

Michigan Association of Supervisors of Special Education

Michigan Department of Education

Michigan Elementary and Middle School Principals Association

Michigan's Integrated Behavior and Learning Support Initiative

Michigan Reading Association

Michigan State University

Michigan Virtual University

Reading NOW Network

REMC Association of Michigan

Southwest Michigan Reading Council

Technology Readiness Infrastructure Grant

University of Michigan

Feedback on drafts of the document was elicited from other stakeholders, resulting in a number of revisions to the document.

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